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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000077

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SUBJECT: DUELING STATEMENTS BY SENIOR CUBANS: "GOOD COP,
BAD COP" OR IS ANYONE IN CHARGE HERE?

Classified By: CHG James L Williams for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A "Reflexiones" piece by Fidel Castro critical of President Obama on January 29 followed by more laudatory statements by National Assembly president Ricardo Alarcon two days later have gotten the local rumor mill spun up again. The now extended travel of Raul Castro to Russia, Angola and Algeria while first VP Machado traveled to Caracas for the ALBA anniversary also has generated speculation on the state of affairs within the senior ranks of the GOC. End Summary

¶2. (C) Using traditional arguments, the "Reflexiones" piece takes the President to task for supporting Israel and therefore, according to Fidel, supporting genocide. More strangely, however, the piece also quotes the President as saying several things about the status of the Guantanamo Naval Base and its relationship to US-Cuban relations, which Fidel uses to attack U.S. Cuba policy, but which also appear to be completely without foundation. While the Cuban regime, and Fidel in particular, are masters at twisting the truth or using it selectively to make a contentious point, they almost never make up a propaganda blast like this one out of whole cloth. This led some to speculate that others inside the GOC who oppose any improvement in relations with the U.S. (and Fidel could most certainly be included in that group if he is still lucid) created the "Reflexiones" piece in order to dampen enthusiasm for any steps toward improvement on the Cuban side.

¶3. (C) Then came a press interview of Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon, published in the official media, which lauded President Obama as an intelligent and careful politician, and said that he should be given space so that he can make the right decision. This apparent rebuff of statements made by Fidel himself generated immediate speculation as to the GOC's intentions. Some thought it could be a sort of "good cop, bad cop" routine designed to force a policy statement from the new administration. Such carefully orchestrated campaigns to influence public or international opinion are so common that average Cubans simply take them for granted.

¶4. (C) However, all of this took place concurrent with an unusual travel schedule of senior officials, with Raul Castro spending almost a full week in Russia and then traveling to Angola and Algeria, at the same time that first VP Jose Ramon Machado flew to Caracas for the ALBA 10th anniversary celebration. This has led to further speculation about the state of leadership in Cuba in general. The question being:

is anyone really in charge at the moment.

15. (C) COMMENT: We too were surprised by Fidel's comments. The lawyer in him has traditionally made him cautious about potential rebuttals even when he is making the most outrageous comments. It is very unlike him to say something false that can be checked. We do not believe that there is a "good cop, bad cop" game being played here. Rather, we tend to agree with those who believe that, absent some key leaders, public statements are not being vetted as closely as usual. While this implies some lack of control on the public messaging side, we do not believe that the absence of multiple senior leaders implies any true lack of control in Cuba. Another VP, Juan Almeida, (there are total of seven) has been acting as the public face of the GOC at home, and he and others within the cupola of the regime are perfectly capable of maintaining order and control through the extensive security apparatus. It will be interesting to see if the GOC's public diplomacy machinery runs smoothly through the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review and the visit of Chilean President Bachelet, each of which could generate challenges to the regime.

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